

Message Text

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PAGE 01 STATE 123883
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TAGS: SOPR, CG

SUBJECT: SHABA INCURSIONS: U.S. PRESS REACT

1. WASH POST MAY 15 FRONT PAGE STORY BY DAVID OTTAWAY
FROM LUSAKA HEADLINED "ZAIRE SAYS REBELS BACKED BY
ANGOLA INVADE THE SOUTH." TEXT FOLLOWS. QUOTE - THE
ZAIRIAN GOVERNMENT SAID YESTERDAY THAT THOUSANDS OF ANGOLAN
BACKED REBELS HAVE AGAIN INVADED THE SOUTHWESTERN PROVINCE
OF SHABA AND ATTACKED TWO MAJOR TOWNS, INCLUDING THE MINING
CENTER OF KOLWEZI.

ANNOUNCING THE RENEWED REBEL OFFENSIVE IN THE COPPER-RICH
PROVINCE, THE OFFICIAL ZAIRES NEWS AGENCY SAID THAT GOVERN-
MENT TROOPS YESTERDAY BEAT BACK AN INSURGENT FORCE, SAID TO
INCLUDE CUBAN TROOPS, THAT TRIED TO STORM THE RAILWAY TOWN
OF MUTSHATSHA AFTER A TWO-HOUR BATTLE. THE SMALL TOWN IS
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PAGE 02 STATE 123883

ABOUT 60 MILES WEST OF KOLWEZI AND ABOUT 30 MILES FROM THE
ANGOLAN BORDER. IT WAS CAPTURED BY REBEL INVADERS LAST
YEAR.

IT ALSO SAID ANOTHER ATTACK INVOLVING 4,000 REBELS TOOK
PLACE THURSDAY ON KOLWEZI ITSELF BUT DID NOT MAKE ALTO-
GETHER CLEAR WHETHER THE TOWN WAS STILL IN GOVERNMENT HANDS.

IT WAS PRESUMED HERE, HOWEVER, THAT IT WAS, SINCE ITS FALL

WOULD HAVE BEEN A MAJOR EVENT KNOWN TO WESTERN EMBASSIES
BY NOW.

(BOTH FRANCE AND MOROCCO SAID YESTERDAY THAT ZAIRE HAD RE-
QUESTED AID IN REPELLING THE ATTACK.)

THE NEWS AGENCY ACCOUNT SAID THE FORCE ATTACKING MUTSHATSHA
INCLUDED "WHITES WHO HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS CUBANS." DUR-
ING THE 1977 FIGHTING ZAIRE BROKE RELATIONS WITH HAVANA,
CHARGING THAT CUBANS WERE LEADING THE REBEL INVADERS.
CUBAN SOLDIERS ASSISTED THE PRESENT ANGOLAN GOVERNMENT
TO DEFEAT TWO RIVAL NATIONALIST GROUPS IN THE 1976 CIVIL
WAR THAT FOLLOWED PORTUGAL'S WITHDRAWAL FROM ITS FORMER
COLONY.

INITIAL REPORTS ON THE FIGHTING WERE EXTREMELY SKETCHY
AND THERE WAS SOME INITIAL DOUBT AS TO THEIR AUTHENTICITY.
THE BELGIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY IN BRUSSELS SAID, HOWEVER,
THAT IT APPEARED THE SITUATION WAS AT LEAST AS SERIOUS
AS LAST YEAR'S UPRISING IN SHABA PROVINCE.

OBSERVERS HERE SAID THAT IF THE ZAIRE NEWS AGENCY REPORTS
WERE CORRECT THEY INDICATED THE FIGHTING WAS FAR MORE
SERIOUS THAN BEFORE FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF PRESIDENT
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PAGE 03 STATE 123883

MOBUTU SESE SEKO.

(THERE ARE ABOUT 80 AMERICANS LIVING IN THE AREA THAT IS
THE SCENE OF THE CURRENT FIGHTING, A STATE DEPARTMENT
SPOKESWOMAN SAID YESTERDAY. SHE SAID THEY WERE EITHER
MISSIONARY FAMILIES OR CONNECTED WITH PRIVATE AMERICAN
COMPANIES OPERATING IN THE AREA. THEIR SITUATION IS UN-
KNOWN, SHE SAID.)

IN LAST YEAR'S 80-DAY WAR AGAINST ANGOLAN-SUPPORTED IN-
SURGENTS, THE ZAIRIAN ARMY PREVAILED WITH THE HELP OF
1,500 MOROCCAN TROOPS FLOWN IN ON FRENCH TRANSPORT PLANES.
TO MOBUTU'S DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT, THE UNITED STATES PRO-
VIDED ONLY LIMITED MILITARY ASSISTANCE.

THE REBELS, WHO THE ZAIRIAN LEADER CLAIMED WERE ARMED AND
TRAINED BY THE SOVIET UNION AS WELL AS CUBA, FAILED TO GET
AS FAR AS KOLWEZI BEFORE THEY WERE DRIVEN BACK ACROSS THE
ANGOLAN BORDER. AFTER TAKING MUTSHATSHA, HOWEVER, THEY
ADVANCED TO WITHIN ABOUT 30 MILES OF KOLWEZI BEFORE DIS-
PERSING INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE WHEN CONFRONTED BY THE
MOROCCAN TROOPS.

THERE WAS REMARKABLY LITTLE DIRECT COMBAT BETWEEN THE

ZAIRIAN ARMY AND THE REBELS LAST YEAR, MAKING THE WAR A SHADOWY ONE WHOSE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT WAS FAR GREATER THAN ITS REAL MILITARY SIGNIFICANCE.

THE SEIZURE OF SHABA PROVINCE, HOWEVER, WOULD PROBABLY DELIVER A MORTAL BLOW TO THE ALREADY TROUBLED MOBUTU GOVERNMENT. IT HAS BEEN FACED RECENTLY WITH MINOR REBELLIONS IN SEVERAL PROVINCES AND AN ALLEGED COUP ATTEMPT.

OBSERVERS HERE WERE STRUCK BY THE INITIAL BOLDNESS OF THE REBELS THIS TIME IN ATTACKING MUTSHATSHA, WHICH HAS JUST UNCLASSIFIED

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PAGE 04 STATE 123883

BEEN REINFORCED BY A BATTALION OF GOVERNMENT COMMANDOS.

IN ADDITION, THE ATTACK ON KOLWEZI WOULD SEEM TO INDICATE THAT THE REBELS ARE FAR BETTER ORGANIZED AND MORE AGGRESSIVE THAN THEY WERE LAST YEAR WHEN THEIR UNEXPECTEDLY RAPID INITIAL ADVANCE OUTSTRIPPED THEIR ABILITY TO MAINTAIN THE NECESSARY SUPPLY LINES.

THERE HAVE BEEN PERIODIC REPORTS OUT OF ZAIRE OVER THE LAST TWO MONTHS OF A REBEL BUILDUP AROUND THE ZAIRIAN BORDER TOWN OF LUASHI. AS MANY AS 3,000 INSURGENTS WERE SAID TO BE ASSEMBLYING AND MAKING OCCASIONAL STRIKES ON ZAIRAIN MILITARY CONVOYS IN THE REGION.

THIS SEEMED TO EXPLAIN WHY MOBUTU SENT A BATTALION OF COMMANDOS TO THE PROVINCE IN EARLY FEBRUARY TO BOLSTER

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THE NORTH KOREAN-TRAINED DIVISION STATIONED THERE SINCE LAST YEAR.

THE INSURGENTS ARE THOUGHT TO BELONG TO THE NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT OF THE CONGO KINSHASA LED BY GEN. NATIONALIEL MBUMBA. ITS IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION REMAIN UNCLEAR DESPITE ITS ALLEGED CUBAN, SOVIET AND ANGOLAN BACKING.

THE FRONT'S ARMY WAS INITIALLY SAID TO HAVE BEEN FORMED BY FORMER KATANGAN GENDARMES WHO FLED TO ANGOLA WHEN THE SECESSIONIST MOVEMENT UNDER THE LATE MOISE TSHOMBE COLLAPSED IN 1963. KATANGA WAS THE FORMER NAME OF SHABA PROVINCE.

THE KATANGAN POLICEMEN LATER HELPED THE SOVIET AND CUBAN UNCLASSIFIED

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PAGE 05 STATE 123883

BACKED POPULAR MOVEMENT FOR THE LIBERATION OF ANGOLA TO
OVERWHELM ITS PRO-WESTERN OPPONENTS DURING THE 1975-76
CIVIL WAR IN ANGOLA.

IT IS NOW THOUGHT HOWEVER, THAT MOST OF THESE GENDARMES ARE

TOO OLD TO FIGHT AND THAT THE FRONT DRAWS MOST OF ITS RE-
CRUITS FROM DISSIDENT BALUBA AND LUNDA TRIBESMEN IN ZAIRE.
AFTER LAST YEAR'S FIGHTING, SOME 240,000 REFUGEES FLED
SHABA PROVINCE INTO ANGOLA, ACCORDING TO THE ANGOLAN GOVERN-
MENT.

THE NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT IS ONE OF HALF A DOZEN OPPOSI-
TION GROUPS NOW SEEKING TO OVERTHROW MOBUTU, WHO HAS RULED
THE VAST MINERAL-RICH CENTRAL AFRICAN COUNTRY OF 25
MILLION PEOPLE FOR THE PAST 12 YEARS. SO FAR, THERE HAS
BEEN LITTLE COOPERATION OR COORDINATION OF ACTIVITIES
AMONG THE OPPOSITION GROUPS.

IN MARCH, THE MOBUTU GOVERNMENT EXECUTED 13 MEN FOLLOWING
A "TREASON TRIAL" INVOLVING A TOTAL OF 91 PERSONS. AMONG
THEM WERE 67 MILITARY OFFICERS. ONE OF THOSE SAID TO BE
IMPLICATED IN THE CONSPIRACY WAS MOBUTU'S OWN INTERNAL
SECURITY CHIEF, MAJ. PANUMBULE.

ZAIRE, WITH A DOLS 3 BILLION FOREIGN DEBT, IS PRESENTLY
FACING A MAJOR ECONOMIC CRISIS THAT HAS SERVED TO ERODE
MOBUTU'S POPULARITY AND TO INCITE UNREST AMONG HIS PEOPLE.
INFLATION IS PUT AT 75 PERCENT A YEAR AND THE SHORTAGE OF
KEY FOOD COMMODITIES HAS BEEN COMMON.

THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL BLOODY LOCAL REBELLIONS RECENTLY
IN OTHER PROVINCES. THEY WERE SUPPRESSED WITH CONSIDER-
ABLE BLOODSHED BY THE ARMY.

THE INSURGENCY IN SHABA, HOWEVER, IS OF AN ENTIRELY
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PAGE 06 STATE 123883

DIFFERENT ORDER BECAUSE OF THE PROBABLE INVOLVEMENT OF
ANGOLA IN HELPING TO ARM AND TRAIN THE REBELS. IF THE
ZAIRE NEWS AGENCY REPORTS ARE CORRECT, IT IS LIKELY THE
MOBUTU GOVERNMENT NOW FACES A FAR MORE SERIOUS CHALLENGE
THAT, IF NOT CONTAINED QUICKLY, COULD LEAD TO ITS DOWNFALL.
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